

Immeasurable Beauty
Mark 14:3-9
March 12, 2006
Rev. Tim Akers

Last Thursday I was planning on doing some work for the youth retreat, so I sat on the couch with my computer on my lap to start. The phone rings. I get up and run into the kitchen. “Hello, Hello!” There’s a pause, but no response. You know what that means: telemarketer. So I hang up before they could mispronounce my name. I go back to the couch – this time taking the phone with me – and put the computer back on my lap to start working. A minute later the phone rings. I answer again, but this time I don’t hang up quickly enough. “Hello, is Mr. or Mrs. Ackers home?” I got five or six calls from telemarketers in less than 30 minutes. Finally, the phone stops ringing and I’m ready to dive into my work for the retreat.

I think maybe that is how those relaxing and eating dinner at Simon’s house felt when the woman came in with an expensive alabaster jar. She was distracting them from their meal and time of relaxing. Simon probably made sure that he would have just a few of his friends over so that Jesus could relax and enjoy the evening. So, when this woman came in Simon was probably irritated and said to himself, “Who does this woman think she is, coming into my house and interrupting our dinner!” We can see why they are irritated.

But what happens next is a bit surprising and raises a few questions. She breaks the alabaster jar filled with pure nard, an expensive perfume, and pours all of it on Jesus’ head, anointing him. The strong, sweet fragrance probably filled the entire house. At first we might not think anything of this woman using the whole jar of nard to anoint Jesus. But, the perfume comes from the nard plant that is native to India, so the nard was a costly imported luxury. This is expensive stuff!

I like to think of myself as a reasonable spender, meaning I don’t like to spend too much on one item. But occasionally I will. Several months ago I bought a bottle of cologne from Banana Republic - not that cheap - and I found that I was limiting myself on how many times I could use it during the week. So, my first reaction after I realized how expensive the perfume was, “Did she have to use it all?” I agreed with those rebuking her for wasting the perfume. They have a good point, the perfume could have been sold and the money given to help the poor. The nard could have been sold for more than a year’s wages. Could you imagine spending a year of your wages on a bottle of perfume, and then using it all at once to pour over someone’s head? Do you see why this was looked at as a waste?

The expensive perfume makes me wonder how a woman like this could afford such a valuable item. If we think about it, this woman found her way into the house of a leper, and we know that lepers were put at the bottom of the social status. They were outcasts. More than likely the woman was not of great wealth. This leads us to believe that this jar of nard was possibly one of her most precious possessions. It was priceless. Think of one of your most precious possessions you own, besides your children. Personally I can think of two: my music box that belonged to my Grandma Hebert and the portrait of my family. Giving your most precious possession to someone expresses

how important they are to you. The woman expressed her love for Jesus, she poured out her love to him.

One scholar tried to explain the woman's expression of love, saying that, "Her love for Jesus was the love a person holds that is meaningful beyond anything else she might know. You cannot place a value on this love because that means it could have been greater. Her actions were the work of love; it is not from the head but from the heart. This work of love does not just dawn on us but overcomes us! This kind of love cannot be explained to anyone who has not experienced it and does not have to be explained to anyone who has."

The woman loved Jesus for what he has done and what he will do. She knows what he is going to do. Jesus is about to pour out his blood for her. She knew that his death would be redemptive. She knew that through it she would come to find God's love for her, for us. She knew, even though she was not wealthy, he loved her no less than if she was. "If he is going to do that for me I can pour out my most precious perfume for him." The woman understood, but the others present didn't. By pouring the perfume on him she was anointing his body and preparing him for his burial. Knowing what we know now, we might not come down on her for wasting, or I should say using, the perfume to anoint Jesus.

Jesus stood up for the woman. "Leave her alone! Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. She did what she could." I imagine that Jesus had tears running down his face when telling the others how beautiful this woman's expression of love was. She did all she could, she expressed her love with all she had. This work of love does not count the cost. This work of love is an immeasurable beauty and Jesus has acknowledged that.

We do have to be careful when we interpret Jesus' words here. He states "that the poor will always be here, but I won't." Jesus is not saying that we should not be concerned about the poor. Jesus is stating the reality of society, that there will always be those who are in need.

Why is the woman's beautiful expression so important and what does this mean for us? "She has done a beautiful thing for me." Jesus is reminding those present that there are moments in our lives when love in all its unexplainable glory breaks in upon us with such a force that we can only stand in awe and feel its beauty and allow it to overwhelm us. This woman knew the path Jesus was going to take to the cross and she knew she had to slow down and take this moment to pour out her love for Jesus.

Our culture today provides us with many distractions in the midst of our fast-paced lives. It could be the telemarketer calling while you're giving the kids a bath. Maybe the kids are begging you to take them to the park while you're on the computer trying to get some work done. Your schedule is full and puts so many demands on your time you don't see how it's possible to join the PTO or go to the soup kitchen once a month. Our fast-paced lives can distract us from seeing Christ's love, and we can easily miss a glimpse of Christ's love and miss opportunities to pour out our love for Christ. These distractions in life are like gnats; they are small but they're always swarming around your head annoying you. Despite the distractions, the truly good in life – Christ's love – is here if you're patient and persistent enough to look for it. When we see it, we

stop and can only stand in the awe of its beauty. It's these moments that ignite us, prompt us, and inspire us to pour out our love and adore Christ.

But that's not enough to just be inspired, because the real work is to find a way to keep that flame burning and keep the Spirit inside of us despite all the distractions that threaten to put it out. The work of love is to see the world just as the woman who anointed Jesus saw it - transformed. This is the work of love.

How do we pour out our love for Christ? What does it look like? We can't physically anoint Jesus' head with perfume. Jesus did tell us that we will always have the opportunity help those in need. We can express our love for Christ through serving others. This could be going to Community Social Services (we know it as St. Bart's) or other soup kitchens, or collecting and delivering supplies to 'Open Door Ministries.' Yet, we can't overlook those who are in need but don't need money, food, or shelter. It could be your neighbor who needs someone to talk to because they're struggling with the loss of their mother. Your co-worker could use a friend because her brother is having surgery next week. Your friend is feeling stressed due to work and taking care of her children and needs someone to just stop and listen. Maybe you make a phone call to a friend that you haven't talked to for a while to see if they are alright. A brief amount of time intentionally given to others lets them know you love them and allows Christ's love to break through.

So, slow down and be patient and persistent in looking for Christ love. Then when you see it, and experience the awe of its beauty, take it in and then pour it out for others to experience. This is the work of love and it is a beautiful thing, so beautiful that wherever the gospel is preached this love will be shared. Slow down and don't miss the opportunities to pour out your love, a love that's immeasurable, to adore Christ.